



ANCIENT GREECE



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THE MINOANS

Greece is a land-mass on the north-eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea and the surrounding islands. The first inhabitants who lived in Greece were known as the *"Minoans"* about 40 000 years ago. They were farmers who settled on the island of Crete around 6000 B.C.. By 2000 B.C. the civilization on the island was flourishing with a highly organized economy of trade. The people were skilled craftsmen and artists and some people could read and write. Most of the people made their living from farming. The Minoans kept animals and grew crops such as wheat, barley, olives and grapes. They hunted and fished which provided extra food.

The Minoans travelled widely, both on Crete and abroad. They used carts pulled by oxen or donkeys wherever there were roads and often travelled by sea. They sailed to other countries to trade their pottery and other goods.

Towns were built by the coast in places where the sea and the fertile farmlands can be reached easily. The larger towns were built around a palace. Four of the palaces were found at *Knossos*, *Zakro*, *Phaestos* and *Mallia*.

The largest palace was at a place called *"Knossos"*. It covered around 20 000 square metres (215 000 square feet) and over 30 000 people lived in the palace and surrounding area. Each palace had private apartments in which the royal family lived. The apartments had large, airy rooms and were decorated with colourful wall paintings called *"frescoes"*. These were made by applying paint to wet plaster. The frescoes have provided archaeologists with much valuable information about Minoan dress and customs.

The palace was built mainly of stone and the various buildings were arranged round a large courtyard which was used for religious ceremonies. The roofs, ceilings and doors were made of wood. Some parts of the buildings had three or four storeys. The floors in the different levels were supported by wooden columns which were painted red. Open shafts which ran from the roof to the ground let light into the building. These shafts were known as light wells. Staircases and corridors led from the light wells to the rooms on each level. The palace was decorated with images of a bull's horns. Store rooms at the palaces were used to store grain, wine and oil which was produced on farms. The food was used to feed the court.



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Many people lived in smaller houses outside the palace grounds. The houses varied in size but each house usually had the storage, cooking and work areas downstairs, with living and sleeping quarters above. Some of the houses also had a room on the roof.

The Minoans were very religious people and several special rooms in the palace were set aside for religious ceremonies. Outdoor shrines were also used to worship the many gods and goddesses. The Minoans decorated palaces, tombs and pots with two sacred symbols - horns of the bull and the double-headed axe. The Minoans believed in some form of life after death. They buried people with food and personal possessions to be used in the afterlife.

In about 1450 B.C. all the palaces on Crete were destroyed. Scientists feel that a series of massive volcanic eruptions virtually blew away most of the island. The first eruption had blasted a hole in the side of an old crater, sea water had poured in onto the white hot lava and a huge explosion was the result.